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Single mother wins inaugural award for service to community

Hundreds swear oath to serve others throughout the Commonwealth

Richmond, Va. – A single mother of three who volunteers to increase literacy in her community has been presented with the first annual [Robert E. Wone Award for Exemplary Service](#). Cheryl Jennings is a Hampton native and student at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), where she volunteers through its AmeriCorps program as a team leader, reading coach and mentor at a local elementary school. Established in memory of Robert E. Wone, a former member of the Governor's Commission on Community and National Service and Northern Virginia resident, the award recognizes an AmeriCorps member who exhibits outstanding community service.

The presentation of the award was the highlight of two recent AmeriCorps events. During ceremonies in Central and Southwest Virginia, hundreds of first-time and returning AmeriCorps members, mainly students, swore an oath to work diligently to better their communities through volunteerism. On Oct. 18 at VCU in Richmond and on Oct. 31 at Virginia Highlands Community College in Abingdon, AmeriCorps members were honored for their service and Wone Award nominees were recognized.

For Jennings, the award was unexpected, as she believes everyone should contribute to society. "Volunteering comes naturally for me. We should all give back to our community. The blessings you receive in return far outweigh what you give," Jennings explained. "I am honored to receive this award because of what it symbolizes. I am dedicated to carrying on the spirit of service, just as Robert Wone did," said Jennings, who volunteered more than 1,700 hours during the last school year, while working full time and completing her degree in social work at VCU.

Members of Robert Wone's family attended the Richmond ceremony and were touched to see their loved one's legacy of service continue. His widow, Kathy Wone, said, "Congratulations to Cheryl and the Virginia Commission on Community and National Service. The family thanks the Commission for their moving tributes to Robert." During the Abingdon ceremony, special honors were given to Judith Ann Murray, Lisa Gabourel, and Sharon Kay Odle – all Wone Award nominees.

AmeriCorps is a network of service programs connecting volunteers with organizations to meet critical needs in education, public safety, health and the environment. In exchange for their service, AmeriCorps members earn an education award of up to **\$4,725** to be used for college or graduate school tuition or to pay back qualified student loans. Since 1994, more than **4,700** Virginians have qualified for AmeriCorps Education Awards totaling more than **\$17,200,000**.

In the Commonwealth, the AmeriCorps State program is administered through the Virginia Department of Social Services' (VDSS) Office on Volunteerism and Community Service (OVCS). "The ultimate goal is to bring Virginians together to strengthen communities through service. Serving with AmeriCorps provides excellent incentives and promotes education," said OVCS Executive Director Nikki Nicholau. To find AmeriCorps volunteer opportunities in your region, visit www.vaservice.org and click "Join AmeriCorps," or contact the OVCS at (800) 638-3839 or (804) 726-7065.

The Virginia Department of Social Services administers social services programs, consistent with federal and state law and policy of the State Board of Social Services, through 120 local departments of social services throughout the state and its home office in Richmond. The VDSS mission is "People helping people triumph over poverty, abuse, and neglect to shape strong futures for themselves, their families and communities."

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Editor's note: Interviews are available upon request. For additional story ideas, sound clips and information, contact Carla Harris, VDSS, (804) 726-7107 or carla.harris@dss.virginia.gov. For more information on AmeriCorps, visit www.vaservice.com. For details on the Robert E. Wone Award for Exemplary Service, including photos a bio of this year's winner, visit http://www.vaservice.org/go/national/wone_award/